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# Indiana Magazine of History

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## The Bicycle Boom and the Bicycle Bloc

### Cycling and Politics in the 1890s

MICHAEL TAYLOR

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On October 9, 1896, readers of the *Indianapolis News* learned that about three hundred cyclists planned to gather that evening for a parade before boarding a special train bound for Canton, Ohio. The cyclists were to carry flambeaus and lanterns; their bikes would be fitted out with "bicycle locusts," noisemakers designed to catch the attention of passers-by.<sup>1</sup> The group left for Ohio soon after the parade, making several stops along the way in places like Anderson, Indiana, to pick up additional "wheelmen." On board the train was a special bicycle, carefully wrapped in a blanket, and stored in a place all to itself to prevent damage. Upon reaching their destination, the Indiana wheelmen were met by a bicycle escort and led to the house of Governor William McKinley, then in the final stretch of a hot race for the presidency. After addressing the crowd of cyclists, McKinley was presented with his shining new bicycle. "Major McKinley is not a bicyclist," the *News* reported on the following day, "but has frequently

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expressed his admiration for the sport, and no one will be surprised to see him at one of the cycle schools with his new wheel in the near future."<sup>2</sup>

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McKinley Campaign Button, 1896  
In the 1890s, the popularity of bicycling and the new phenomenon of political buttons combined to produce a new motif in campaign advertising.

Courtesy of the author

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It would be easy to brush off this story as just another sign of the cycling craze of the 1890s. Large groups of cyclists were, after all, a common sight at the end of the nineteenth century. 1896 was the height of the "bicycle boom," a period of almost ten years when Americans of every age, class, sex, and race fell head-over-heels in love with a novel form of transportation that promised health and happiness, personal liberty and social equality. As Richard Harmond has observed, the success of the cycling craze was due in large part to the "paradoxical attraction of the bicycle—as an instance of inventive progress and as a means of flight from the consequences of such progress."<sup>3</sup> On a more basic level, however, this success can be attributed to major improvements in bicycle design in the late 1880s that resulted in a safer, more comfortable form of transportation, one essentially no different from the bicycle we ride today. Thanks to these improvements, millions of ordinary Americans became cyclists in the 1890s. "Everyone was supposed to ride a bicycle and one was not what they called 'in the swim' unless you

mastered the wheel," one contemporary later wrote.<sup>4</sup> America was "wheel crazy," and the sight of large groups of cyclists was not unusual.

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